Packaged food, steel exporting, a gift shop and a campground: Afshan Khan learned versatility from her parents

NORA SHELLY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Summer series: Tales from Jobs Past

When she was about 8 or 9, Afshan Khan and her sister would go with their parents once a month to Canonsburg, where they would spend a Saturday preparing and canning three Indian dishes. There was an eggplant dish, as well as a dessert called gulab jamun, which are balls of sweet dough covered in a heavy syrup.
After helping her parents package the food, Ms. Khan and her sister would help mark the cans with their company’s label. It had an illustration of the Taj Mahal on it — an ode to the company name: Taj Mahal Brand Foods.

Periodically, the whole family would take the cans up to New York City, where they would try to sell them to Indian grocery stores. It didn’t go very well.

“[They] were pioneers in their time,” Ms. Khan, now 54, said of her parents, laughing. “They even sold prepared Indian food in a market that wasn’t ready for Indian food.”

The family trucked up to New York because they thought they would have better luck there than in Pittsburgh. But the Khans, who lived in Pleasant Hills, did sell the cans to Bombay Emporium, an Indian grocery store in Oakland.
“I always remember as a kid, they kept those cans on the ... shelf for forever, and I remember thinking, ‘Man, isn’t there an expiration date on those?’” Ms. Khan said.

The prepackaged food business was just the beginning of the Khan family’s ventures. Ms. Khan’s parents, both immigrants from India, had day jobs: her dad at Westinghouse and her mom as a keypuncher at American Water.

But for years they also found time to run the food business, as well as a business selling preformed steel to foreign markets, a campground near Seven Springs and a gift shop out of Century III Mall.

Ms. Khan, now an executive-in-residence at startup accelerator and seed investor Innovation Works, and her sister helped out with all of them.

“The best labor is cheap labor, which is your family,” she quipped.

Besides the occasional argument with her mom or spat with a customer, Ms. Khan said she enjoyed the work.

“I enjoyed the thrill of finding new customers. I enjoyed the thrill of understanding how we could become profitable,” she said.
Ms. Khan said nothing exemplifies that spirit more than her father’s move to Saudi Arabia when she was 12. Mr. Khan wanted to see if there was opportunity to start a construction company in the country whose economy was exploding thanks to the oil boom in the Arabian peninsula.

After about two years of searching for the right opportunity, he succeeded, eventually growing his enterprise into a successful company.

Her father ended up staying in the Middle East for 10 years with his business — at one point turning down an opportunity to return to Westinghouse because Ms. Khan’s mother urged him to stay the course in Saudi Arabia.

“I think it was hard from a work-life balance for my father to be away for 10 years of my young, impressionable life, but they did their best to instill a hard work ethic and the value of sort of pursuing your own path,” Ms. Khan said.

“It showed the true grit and perseverance of immigration in this country. Folks who work very, very hard — not necessarily for the money but to establish a foothold in their respective field.”

As the child of immigrants growing up in the South Hills, Ms. Khan said she always knew she was different from other kids. Although the family was welcomed in the community, she said it was something that weighed on her when she was a child.

When she was getting her master’s degree at Carnegie Mellon University, Ms. Khan decided to make her background one of her strengths.

Tasked with devising a business plan for a graduate entrepreneurship class at CMU in 1991, Ms. Khan thought of her frustration with the fact that there weren’t quality greeting cards that Muslims could buy to celebrate birthdays, special occasions or religious holidays. So, she and a classmate started Salaam
Greetings Inc., then one of the few greeting card companies that catered exclusively to Muslims.

Ms. Khan won several business awards for the company. Although she chose not to pursue it full time in order to start a job at Xerox Corp., she said it allowed her to put to use the lessons she learned from working with her parents as a child.

Those lessons also helped her lead the Washington County construction materials company she ran for 13 years until it was sold in 2013, and it is also helping in her current role at Innovation Works.

As an executive-in-residence, Ms. Khan works with local startups and hardware companies in devising business plans and in finding local manufacturing resources.

“This position allows us to see true grit and perseverance and the brilliance of entrepreneurs in the hardware space here in our region,” she said. “Perseverance is something that cannot be taught.”

Nora Shelly, nshelly@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1936.
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